

**Subject: [TRAV-NET] Chair of the draft  
Housing Bill supports Travellers**

**Date:** Tue, 13 Jan 2004 06:16:08 -0800

**From:** andrew ryder <romanistan@YAHOO.COM>

**Reply-To:** 'Traveller-Net' Network <TRAVELLER-NE

**To:** TRAVELLER-NET@JISCMAIL.AC.UK

Hi,

In the debate in the commons on Monday on the second reading of the Housing Bill, Andrew Bennet chair of the ODPM Committee for the Draft Housing Bill also said the Housing Bill should address Traveller accommodation needs.

In his speech he referred to the powerful arguments Travellers (delegation from the Traveller Law Reform Coalition) had presented to his committee.

The support of Bennet is a good sign.

Regards

Andrew Ryder

--- andrew ryder <romanistan@YAHOO.COM> wrote:

> Hi

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> Kevin McNamara MP and Karen Buck MP  
spoke in the

Kevin McNamara MP and Karen Buck MP speaking at the Second Reading of the Housing Bill 12 January 2004

[Mr. Kevin McNamara \(Hull, North\) \(Lab\)](#)

I apologise to the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) for my absence during his contribution to the debate. I was attending a Select Committee meeting, but I have otherwise been present for the whole debate.

I declare an interest as the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on Traveller law reform, which is one of the more recent additions to the list. In active partnership with the Traveller Law Reform Coalition, the group has already had a major impact on articulating and addressing the concerns of the Gypsy and Traveller community.

The all-party group and the Gypsy and Traveller community are indebted to the Government for the readiness with which Ministers were prepared to listen to our concerns. I welcome the intention of the [Housing Bill](#) to help the most vulnerable tenants in the private sector and strengthen the Government's drive to meet the 2010 "decent homes for all" target. In particular, I welcome attempts to crack down on landlords, tenants and companies profiteering from the council house sales system. One of the greatest priorities of any Government committed to social justice and equality is to ensure that everyone has the right to decent accommodation.

I fear, however, that one ethnic group—the Gypsy and Traveller community—is being left ever further behind. Lest I appear to be too dissatisfied, I should make it clear that I welcome the fact that the disabled facilities grant will be extended to cover caravan dwellers. The Government accepted the argument and included the change in the Bill, and that covers a major area of concern for the Gypsy and Traveller community.

In 1994, the [Caravan Sites Act 1968](#) was repealed by the [Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994](#). The Labour Opposition at the time opposed the Act. My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike), then shadow spokesman on home affairs, said that the Government's proposals to repeal part of the [Caravan Sites Act 1968](#) do not solve any problems but create more ... What would be achieved by passing the Bill ... To do so would criminalise some gipsies and increase homelessness; it would cause family breakdown and place added pressures on social and education services. It would certainly not solve any problems. Indeed, it is our view that it would create more problems and improve nothing."—[[Official Report, 19 October 1994; Vol. 248, c. 358–9.](#)] My hon. Friend's words were prophetic. Unfortunately for the Gypsy and Traveller community, time has shown those comments to hold a great truth. The present failed policy regime has had a negative impact on the health of the Traveller community and increased the number of unauthorised encampments, which has caused inconvenience for the settled community. Relations between the settled and the Traveller community have inevitably deteriorated as a result.

It is time that the Government addressed the issue of Traveller accommodation. Such action would bring benefits to both Travellers and non-Travellers. It would contribute significantly to ending the spiral of hatred in which the Traveller community exists. We had an example of that in Lewes at the turn of the year, and a fracas took place in Coventry today over issues that will—I hope—be resolved satisfactorily. In any case, it is certain that the additional pressures placed on the Traveller community—including the increased demand for settlements and the use of unauthorised pitches—are causing trouble.

My colleagues in the all-party group and I perceive action by the Government as presenting a win-win situation for Travellers and non-Travellers alike. An ever-growing body of opinion has called on the Government to address Traveller accommodation needs. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister commissioned research, and a report by Pat Niner, entitled "The Provision and Condition of Local Authority Gypsy/Traveller Sites in England" and published in 2003, noted the strength of opinion that exists. She stated: There is no clear, widely

understood national policy towards accommodation for Gypsies and other Travellers in England; there is a general feeling that such a policy is needed involving local authorities and others but with a strong lead from central government. The report notes that within the next five years between 1,000 and 2,000 additional residential pitches and some 2,000 to 2,500 transit pitches will be needed.

I am pleased to report that the Committee that considered the draft [Housing Bill](#), chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Bennett), recommended that the Government introduce a new statutory duty to provide or facilitate sites for Gypsies and Travellers. I regret that it is missing from the Bill.

It is not only Travellers and their representatives who have called for action to address the accommodation needs of Travellers. A range of groups—including the Commission for Racial Equality, Shelter, the Children's Society, the Local Government Association and the National Farmers Union—wants the Government to do more. The Institute for Public Policy Research has also written "Moving Forward", a report on Traveller accommodation that also addresses the issue and recognises its importance for social harmony and social justice.

Rather than reciting a wish list, I shall highlight two steps that the Government should take now. The first, as I have mentioned, is to create a duty on local authorities to provide and facilitate Traveller sites. The second is to legislate to enable Housing Corporation funds to be used for the construction of Traveller sites. That would create a positive opportunity to overcome a major social problem.

I shall conclude by reading a passage from a letter sent by the Commission for Racial Equality to the official in charge of the draft [Housing Bill](#) on 9 June 2003, expressing disappointment that the Bill made no reference to the accommodation of the Gypsy and Traveller community. It stated: The [Race Relations Act 1976](#), as amended by the [Race Relations \(Amendment\) Act 2000](#), gives public authorities, including the ODPM, a statutory duty to work to eliminate unlawful discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and good race relations in all they do. Gypsies and Irish Travellers are defined as racial groups under the [Race Relations Act](#), and by excluding Gypsies and Travellers from a piece of legislation which aims to provide decent homes for all ethnic groups in the settled community, the ODPM risks failing to promote equality of opportunity or to adequately address potential racial discrimination. Further good race relations are unlikely to be promoted if improvements are seen to be offered to certain groups, excluding others. That letter presents a powerful argument that the Government cannot afford to ignore if they value our commitment to social inclusion and our pledge to create decent homes for all. The word "all" should, and must, include the Gypsy and Traveller community.

#### [Ms Karen Buck \(Regent's Park and Kensington, North\) \(Lab\)](#)

Finally, I want to support those colleagues, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara), who have raised the issue of Travellers. I have a Travellers' site in my constituency, [613](#) and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, a Conservative council, has always been positive in dealing with some of the issues in relation to that estate. I am also grateful to the Government for the substantial investment that was put into that site a couple of years ago, which enabled the facilities to be upgraded, which in turn is very welcome. If my hon. Friend were to visit that estate, which is buried under several of the slip roads to the Westway, he would see a kind of vision of hell. As it happens, however, several of its residents would prefer to stay on that site to roaming around in a country in which, as the Institute for Public Policy Research and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's research have found, there is a pitiful shortage of sites. It is precisely because there are so few official sites that are properly regulated and managed that we have some of the tensions between the community and Travellers. If we are to look for a long-term solution, it is an imperative that the Government also take the opportunity to return to some form of the provisions that applied before the repeal in 1994 of the [Caravan Sites Act 1968](#). We must examine the responsibilities of local authorities across the country to ensure an adequate supply of caravan sites.